

## Chinese Language Education in India's Northeast Region: Opportunities and Challenges

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### Abstract

China, being an immediate neighbor of India, with a population of more than 1.41 billion and with the largest economy in Asia with over \$17 trillion GDP, shares a boundary of about 3,488 km. The recent deterioration in the bilateral relations between India and China that led to the banning of several Chinese origin apps including 'WeChat' among others by Indian authorities has a direct impact on the Chinese language education sector in India. This article focuses on the significance of learning the Chinese language and culture in India, especially in India's Northeast region. The article also explores the challenges in learning the Chinese language while discussing the current trends of Chinese language education in the region. Understanding each other's language and culture will facilitate better relations, trade and business between the two neighboring countries.

**Keywords:** Chinese language, Northeast India, language education

### Introduction

China is a country which has a recorded history of over 3,000 years with a population of more than 1.41 billion people (World Bank, 2021). Being the second largest economy in the world surpassing Japan in 2010, its influence on every country, especially the neighboring ones, is immense. Chinese Mandarin language has become more popular globally. Consequently, the demand for learning Mandarin Chinese has been increasing tremendously for the past few decades. To meet this demand, Chinese International Education Foundation (CIEF), earlier

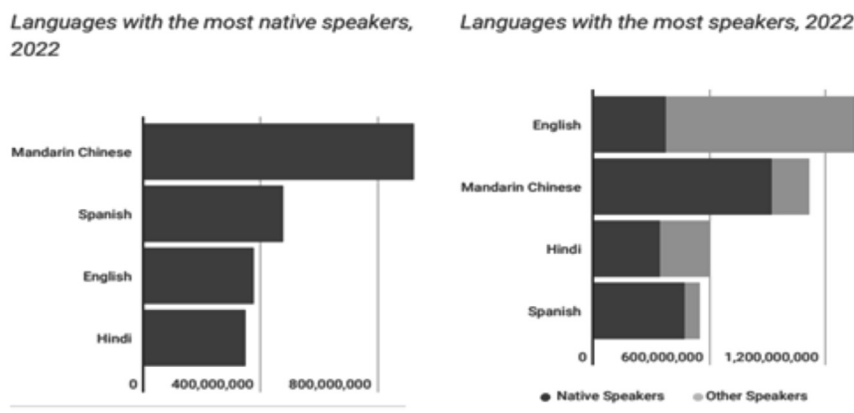
known as 'Hanban', under the Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People's Republic of China, is responsible for providing the Chinese language and culture teaching resources and services and setting up of Confucius institutes globally to assist and promote Mandarin Chinese language education outside China. The first Confucius institute was established in Seoul, South Korea in 2004. According to CIEF's official website, there are 550 Confucius institutes and 1,172 Confucius classrooms across 162 countries and regions as of 2019. Currently, Britain has the largest number of Confucius institutes which is 30 in number, Korea has 23, Germany has 19, France has 18, Thailand has 16, Japan has 15, and so on. India, despite being the immediate neighbor and the second most populous country in the world, has only 2 Confucius institutes and 1 Confucius classroom.

The article discusses the current scenario of Chinese language education globally and specially highlights the Indian context. It further focuses on India's Northeast region. The main objective of the article is to discuss the benefits and opportunities of learning Mandarin Chinese language in India's Northeast region. Considering China being the immediate neighbor of India and the largest economy in Asia and the second largest in the world, the Northeast region has been considered as one of the most strategic locations when it comes to India's Act East Policy. The Northeast region has the potential to facilitate cultural relations, trade and business where language learning can play a vital role. The article also discusses several challenges being faced by teachers and students who are teaching and learning Mandarin Chinese in India particularly in the Northeast region.

### **Status of Mandarin Chinese in the Global Context**

It is a well-known fact that Mandarin Chinese has the largest number of native speakers across the globe. As of 2022, Mandarin Chinese has 920 million native speakers while Spanish ranked second in terms of the number of native speakers which has 475 million people ('What is the most spoken language?', *Ethnologue*, 2022). In terms of the largest number of speakers including non-native speakers, Mandarin Chinese ranked second and has over 1.1 billion speakers.

**Figure 1:** Languages with the Largest Number of Native and Non-native Speakers



Note: This figure has been taken from *Ethnologue* (2022).

China, is continuously increasing its economic power and the spread of the Mandarin Chinese language over the internet and social media is also increasing; and with the growing number of institutes teaching Chinese across the globe, Žyško and Rusinek (2012) predicted that the status of the Chinese language, although, it is a bit early to say, may equal with English. However, Plumb (2016) asserted that Mandarin Chinese, despite being increasingly used in China and by international ethnic Chinese communities, cannot be considered as being a true *lingua-franca* on the global stage. Even if Mandarin Chinese may not enjoy the same status of English in the global stage, the language has earned quite an important place in the global stage, even if we consider just the number of speakers both native and non-native speakers.

### Current Trends of the Chinese Language Education in India

Teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese in India started as early as 1917 in Calcutta University. However, the course had to be discontinued because of shortage of students (Kochhar, 2013). With the support extended by Rabindranath Tagore and Prof. Tan Yunshan, *Cheena Bhavana* in Visva Bharati University was set up in 1937 and started teaching Mandarin Chinese again. Currently, the Department of Chinese Language and Culture (*Cheena Bhavana*) offers B.A. (Hons.), M.A. and PhD in Chinese. Several other Indian universities started

Mandarin Chinese language courses one after another. Banaras Hindu University (BHU) started offering Mandarin Chinese language courses in 1961; University of Delhi (DU) started in 1964 and Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) started in 1976. The list of universities that presently offer Mandarin Chinese language courses are given in Table 1 below.

**Table 1:** List of Indian Universities which Offer Mandarin Chinese Language Courses

Sl. No.	Name of University	Start Year	Courses offered
1	Calcutta University	1917	Certificate in Chinese, Diploma in Chinese
2	Visva Bharati University	1937	B.A., M.A. and PhD in Chinese
3	Banaras Hindu University	1961	B.A., M.A. and PhD in Chinese, 2-Year Part-time Diploma in Chinese
4	University of Delhi	1964	PG Advanced Diploma in Chinese
5	Jawaharlal Nehru University	1976	B.A., M.A. and PhD in Chinese
6	Tezpur University	2003	Certificate in Chinese
7	Doon University	2010	B.A. and M.A. in Chinese
8	Sikkim University	2010	Certificate Course, B.A., M.A. and PhD in Chinese
9	EFLU Hyderabad	2010	B.A. in Chinese
10	Central University of Gujarat	2011	B.A. and M.A. in Chinese
11	Central University of Jharkhand	2012	6 Months Certificate Course, 1 Year PG Diploma, B.A. and M.A. in Chinese
12	Jamia Millia Islamia	2013	Certificate Course, Diploma Course
13	University of Mysore	2014	Diploma in Chinese
14	Manipur University	2018	Certificate Course in Chinese
15	Nava Nalanda Mahavihara	-	Certificate Course, Diploma Course, PhD
16	K.R. Mangalam University, Gurgaon	-	B.A. in Chinese

As mentioned earlier, India has two Confucius institutes which are located at University of Mumbai (MU) and Vellore Institute of Technology (VIT). India also has one Confucius classroom which is located at the School of Chinese Language, Kolkata. Moreover, several private institutes also offer Chinese language courses to the Indian students.

Khana et al. (2020) conducted a study about the motivation, strategy and attitude of teaching and learning Mandarin Chinese in India and observed that the situation of the Chinese language education in India is not encouraging. They also suggested that the teaching methods, teaching materials, and teaching environments need immediate attention and suitable solutions to improve it. They mentioned only the classroom problems and missed out other problems such as political factors. Prof. Vibha Surana, Director In-charge of Confucius Institute, University of Mumbai, expressed the need to increase the Chinese language capacity in the country as the language is important for cultural and strategic reasons.

The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) approved the introduction of Chinese as an optional subject in all its affiliated schools from the academic session 2011-12 (Dasgupta, 2010). The decision was made after India's former Minister of Human Resource Development, Mr Kapil Sibal visited Beijing in September of 2010. Later, the decision could not be fully implemented and the 22 native Chinese teachers who were sent by the Chinese government to assist Mandarin Chinese teaching in India were sent back (Pednekar, 2016).

The New Education Policy (NEP) of India was proposed in 2020. Mandarin Chinese courses were included in the draft version of NEP 2020; however, it got removed from its final version (Haidar & Jebaraj, 2020). In July 2020, The Ministry of Human Resource Development enquired several higher educational institutions (HEIs) and the Chinese language training centres to provide information about the activities of their respective Confucius institutes. Such directives lead to the teachers and students of Mandarin Chinese to face many challenges and uncertainties in teaching and learning of the language in India.

### **Present Scenario of Chinese Language Education in Northeast India**

The entire Northeast region of India currently has three universities which offer Mandarin Chinese courses. Two universities i.e. Manipur

University and Tezpur University offer Certificate courses only. Sikkim University is the only university that runs B.A., M.A. and PhD programmes in Chinese language. Majority of the students in Tezpur University are Indian Army and Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) personnel because Tezpur University has signed MoUs with the Indian Army and ITBP where the university teaches and trains Chinese language skills to the army and ITBP personnel to handle the security issues in the India-China border. Assam Don Bosco University started its first Mandarin programme in November 2020 in partnership with the Republic of China (Taiwan); more than 200 applications were received to fill the 40 seats. Most of these students expressed that Mandarin Chinese would open up many opportunities for further study and improve professional career prospects.

Manipur University, Imphal also signed an MoU with Yunnan Open University, Kunming, China on 13th June, 2016 agreeing on a twelve points agreement which includes joint teaching, development of new degree programmes, especially the Chinese language training programmes through the Chinese language platform provided by Yunnan Open University. In June 2018, the Department of Foreign Languages, Manipur University also signed an MoU with Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences. However, the MoUs are yet to be implemented in spirit and letter.

### **Why Mandarin Chinese in the Northeast Region**

Languages spoken in India's Northeast region mostly belong to the Sino-Tibetan language family. Many of these languages share many common features, for instance, most of the languages are tonal in nature. Lado (1957) opines that the similar features of a native language and a target language facilitate the learning process while the differences interfere with the learning process. As a result, the students of the Northeast region have the potential to grasp and master various phonological and linguistic features in a shorter period of time as compared to students from other linguistic backgrounds. Thus, the author argues that the students of the Northeast region of India should be given more opportunities to learn Mandarin Chinese language.

The Northeast region is still lagging behind the other Indian states in terms of infrastructure, financial status, trade and business, etc. and many students of the region are unable to go to other states to pursue

their studies due to their weak financial background. The Mandarin Chinese teachers teaching in the universities in India's Northeast region feel that this region should have more universities where Chinese language courses can be taught so that the students from the region do not miss out due to weak financial background and other infrastructural limitations. Various projects such as Act East Policy, BCIM Corridor and Trans Asian Railway are all future projects which will be taking place right through India's Northeast region. Looking at the size of China's economy and its population, Mandarin Chinese will surely play a vital role when these projects are implemented. Those who possess Mandarin Chinese language skills will have the added benefits to grab the opportunities at trade and business. Equipping the youth of this region with Mandarin Chinese skills will help them broaden their career options. According to experts, de-emphasising the learning of Mandarin Chinese in India is likely to neither impact China's stance on the border issues nor help India in developing the expertise and resource it needs in dealing with China (Krishnan, 2020). It would rather hamper India to acquire the understanding of China and its intentions. China being an immediate neighbor of India, understanding its language and culture would enhance the mutual harmony and peaceful co-existence.

### **Major Challenges in Teaching and Learning Mandarin Chinese in the Northeast Region**

Several challenges are being encountered by teachers and students in teaching and learning Mandarin Chinese in India's Northeast region. A limited number of universities and institutes that offer Mandarin Chinese courses is one of the major challenges being endured by the teachers and students in the region. As mentioned earlier, out of the three Universities that offer Mandarin Chinese courses in Northeast India, Tezpur University and Manipur University offer only One-year certificate courses. The non-availability of native teachers, basic teaching and learning materials are the other major challenges. Finding basic teaching materials is extremely difficult in the region. Hardly any bookstore in the entire Northeast region has any Chinese textbook and other teaching materials. Some of the textbooks are available virtually; however, acquiring it usually takes two to three weeks and in some instances more. Language environment is another important factor which has great impact in learning a language, which is again not



there in the region although parts of India's Northeast region share an international border with China.

The entire states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, and parts of Sikkim falls under the Protected or Restricted Areas declared by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), Govt. of India where foreign nationals require to get a permit prior to the entry to these places. Access to the whole area of the three states of Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland have been relaxed from being included in the Protected Areas as per a notification dated December 30, 2010 issued by the MHA for a period of one year effective from 1.1.2011, which is extended from time to time. Unfortunately, it is still mandatory for foreign nationals from China to get prior permission from MHA to enter these states.

The challenges faced by the teachers and students in teaching and learning Mandarin Chinese in the region mentioned above appears to be the result of certain policies with regard to access, geographical limitations and logistical issues. The diplomatic relations between India and China have not been at their best since the 1962 India-China war. The frequent escalation of tensions between the two countries due to the border issues lead to the stagnation and even worsening of the situation in the education sector. Following the recent India-China border clash in Galwan valley in June 2020, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY), Government of India banned a total of 270 Chinese origin apps since June 2020 including 'WeChat', the most popular messaging app used by every student who is learning the Chinese language. This app also helps students learning Chinese to find native Chinese language partners for practice. Many teachers and students lost the contact of their friends and colleagues from China when Indian authorities suddenly banned 'WeChat' without any prior information.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Understanding each other's language and culture will facilitate the diplomatic relation, trade and business between the two neighbouring countries. It is an undeniable fact that China is an immediate neighbour of India which has the second largest economy in the world who is also capable of influencing many countries especially the neighbouring ones. Despite the deterioration of bilateral relationship between India



and China after a series of fresh military clashes on the border since 2019, the bilateral trade volume has been increasing remarkably.

The two most populous countries not only in Asia but also in the world need to cooperate with and understand each other. Knowing and understanding each other's language and culture is one of the most important ways to understand each other. 'Cooperation' and 'understanding' cannot happen without knowing and understanding each other's language and culture. With that in mind, understanding each other's language and culture would surely contribute to improving the relations between the two countries.

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